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# No Status Quo for Nintendo

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# No Status Quo for Nintendo

Posted on **March 1, 2007** by **Editor**



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The 2007 Game Developers Conference took place in San Francisco a few weeks ago. The conference is an industry-wide event featuring lectures, an expo floor, and opportunities for game developers from different companies to meet and socialize. For the last few years, the conference has also hosted a special session where some seasoned (and some not-so-seasoned) developers are given the opportunity to rant vociferously on whatever aspect of the industry happens to rub them the wrong way. In the past, these rants have touched on the relationship between publishers and developers, the innovation vacuum created by the video game business model, and the detriments of esoteric hardware decisions made by video game console manufacturers.

This year, one of the ranters concluded that Nintendo's recently-released gaming device called the Wii is a "piece of \*\*\*\*." The crux of the argument is as follows: video games are dependent on technology to produce new types of games, and Nintendo's new system is not enough of a step forward over previous systems to allow for new types of games to be created. After all, the ranter argued, Sony and Microsoft's competing products are able to harness considerably more computational power, which in turn allows developers to create games that are considerably more complex than was possible in previous generations. The speaker went on to argue that this lack of technological innovation is a reflection of Nintendo's policy as a company to focus on "play" rather than "art."

The rant caused an explosion of debate on the internet, and a day or two later the speaker apologized for his remarks. Though Nintendo's consistent profitability [1] makes parts of the argument easy to dismiss, the rant and the controversy that has followed it has shed light on a sharp divide amongst developers in the games industry: those who believe that innovation stems from technical progress (who I will refer to as the *technologists*), and those who believe entertainment and technology lay on orthogonal axes (I will call them *ludologists*).

The technologists have some pretty strong arguments. They argue that fun in video games is a

function of immersion, and that immersion is most directly enhanced by technological improvements. Computationally difficult features like graphics technology, artificial intelligence, and realistic physics can all be created at a higher degree of fidelity when processing power is readily available. The technologists are quick to point out that there are already games available on the new Microsoft and Sony machines that would have been simply impossible to produce on the previous generation of hardware. As examples they provide Capcom's *Dead Rising*, a George Romero-esque title in which the player must fend off crowds of zombies [2]. The sheer number of characters on the screen simultaneously in this title is a testament to the power of Microsoft's Xbox360 console, and as the technologists point out, it would not have been possible on a less-powerful system.

The technologists puts prime importance on technology and operate on the basic assumption that games are limited by the features that a programmer is able to create. They believe that faster machines with more RAM and better video cards will in turn allow programmers to make better games. Many people in the industry today became interested in making games because they learned to program Apple II and Sinclair Spectrum computers when they were kids. Throughout the 1980s, games were developed by a very small number of people, and a lone programmer could produce a commercially successful title. Some of the programmers who cut their teeth in that era have become staunch supporters of the technologists because they have seen what improvements to technology have done over the years: the introduction of computers that could handle 256 unique colors resulted in visuals of (at the time) astounding quality. The jump from 2D games to 3D games in the mid 1990s changed the face of the game industry dramatically. The rise of the internet has created classes of games that simply did not exist five or ten years ago. These sorts of major shifts in the game industry have all been founded upon technical innovation, and for those who worked in the game industry long enough to weather such shifts, it often seems that technology is always the way forward to better game content.

On the other side of the debate from the technologists are the ludologists. Ludology (from the Latin *ludus*, meaning "game") is the study of game play and how interactive entertainment operates at a mechanical level. Though 'ludology' is something of a loaded term [3], I'm going to go ahead and use it to describe the other side of this debate. Ludologists see video games as an extension of other types of organized play, similar to sports and board games. In their view entertainment is a function of the rules and interactions provided by the game environment rather than strictly reliant on immersion. Though ludologists are usually happy to embrace new technology, they also argue that technology itself is not a requirement for game innovation. For example, a ludologist might hold Tetris up as an example of a game that operates on strictly mechanical terms and does not benefit from technological advances. Though the new consoles from Microsoft and Sony may be able to make Tetris prettier than any previous version, the ludologist will point out that the source of entertainment in this game has very little to do with the presentation. Instead, this camp believes that entertainment is primarily a function of user interaction: the actions the user must perform, or the way that the user learns to perform those actions, are the primary source of fun. While many ludologists might be excited by the chance to leverage a more powerful computer to realize their ideas, I think that most would argue that

entertaining titles can be created on any platform because games are fundamentally no more than an organized set of rules.

Returning to the original argument, the speaker at the Games Developers Conference (a hard-core technologist) spoke passionately for his hatred of the Nintendo Wii because he sees it as Nintendo thumbing their nose at other developers. Nintendo is famously good at not only creating video games, but also at creating long lived and powerful brands that continue to resonate with consumers for years (consider *Pokémon* and *Super Mario Bros.*, both Nintendo franchises). In the past, Nintendo has been able to make a solid profit on its hardware without the support of third party developers because its own software sales are so strong (for example, Nintendo's *Super Smash Bros. Melee* sold 3.2 million copies and generated revenues of \$125 million [4]). Some see the Nintendo Wii as just the latest in a series of consoles that are extremely advantageous to the Nintendo brand but needlessly difficult for third party developers. Even the Wii remote, a new type of game controller aimed at appealing to casual gamers, seems to some developers like pretentious flamboyancy. Why is it, they ask, that Nintendo must differ from the norm so extravagantly that sticking to business as usual becomes a chore?

The answer is that Nintendo is deliberately attempting to change the very nature of business as usual. At the 2006 Game Developers Conference, Nintendo president Satoru Iwata gave a keynote entitled "Disrupting Development" in which he discussed Nintendo's approach in some detail [5]. Innovation, Iwata believes, has stagnated because the industry has fallen into a groove. He argues that continued profits require the industry to reach a larger audience, and to do that the industry itself must change. Nintendo's approach to this is to opt out of the technology arms race and instead provide value to its consumers through new forms of interactivity—the Wii remote. This puts them firmly in the ludologists' camp, much to the annoyance of the technologists.

The question left to the technologists is how deeply they believe that the forward march of technology will eventually be the only way to make better games. If they firmly believe this, then their best move is to avoid Nintendo's console all together: clearly Nintendo's business plan does not pander to the status quo, and they probably should not expect the 118-year-old company to change its approach any time soon. The ludologists, on the other hand, do not even have to make a choice. The Wii is a chance for them to practice their trade in a new way, and should it fail, nothing about the competing systems should prevent them from making fun games. In that respect, the anger that came through in the Game Developers Conference rant makes some sort of sense: Nintendo is calling the technologists out and forcing them to question core components of their work. In a few years it should be clear which approach is more appealing to consumers, as the games industry is a harsh tundra where only the profitable survive.

[1] The Wii outsold Sony's Playstation3 this last Christmas.

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/16833561/>

[2] Dead Rising. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead\\_Rising](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Rising)

[3] There is some controversy among industry professionals about which forms of game play are superior to others, and in this debate the ludologists represent the pure “interaction is entertainment” side. I wrote about this debate on my blog a while back ([http://www.dreamdawn.com/sh/post\\_view.php?index=4444](http://www.dreamdawn.com/sh/post_view.php?index=4444)). Regardless, the term here is applicable because the ludologists’ point of view differs significantly from the technologists’.

[4] Source: <http://www.next-gen.biz/page1.html>. In this ranking, *Super Smash Bros. Melee* is ranked fifth.

[5] [http://www.nintendo.com/newsarticle?articleid=ONvHqzNDSG3u4fqnlQtMEKBUNE\\_EmOT&page=default](http://www.nintendo.com/newsarticle?articleid=ONvHqzNDSG3u4fqnlQtMEKBUNE_EmOT&page=default)

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**Tracee Norsaganay**

on **January 30, 2014 at 6:16 PM** said:

I have recently started a site, the info you offer on this web site has helped me tremendously. Thanks for all of your time & work.